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STATINTL

Is U.S. Maintaining A CIA Army In Asia?

Do you know that the United States has a secret army gnawing away in Asia?

That it may not be disbanded when the troops are brought home from Vietnam?

A Southeast Asian expert told a congressional committee this week that the Central Intelligence Agency has built clandestine armies numbering 100,000 in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Fred Branfman, a former member of the International Volunteer Services, called it "the CIA's foreign legion" and said it includes native tribesmen, Thais, Nationalist Chinese, and other Asians.

Their job is to harass the population and troops in Communist-controlled areas of Indochina, except North Vietnam. Presumably, Branfman said, they would continue their fighting with American supplies and money after American forces are withdrawn.

The troops are paid by the CIA, which itself operates on a "secret" budget.

It was the first direct word of what the agency is doing in Asia. Earlier it had been disclosed that Thai troops, paid by the CIA, were operating in Laos, but not so extensively.

The report places the Indochina operation in a new light. Is accommodation with Hanoi possible so long as this force, secretly organized, remains active under the CIA aegis?

Branfman said the CIA exercises functional control of military operations in Laos and other Southeast

Asian countries outside of Vietnam. In Laos, he added, it is conducting "a campaign of terrorism" in Communist-held areas.

There was no immediate indication whether Congress will explore the matter further. The CIA seems to be one of the federal "untouchables."

But if Branfman's story is true—and there is no reason to doubt it—somebody better pin it down. The CIA may have acquired more power than it can safely administer.